

Try 4 Vic

By: Jake Heller

The rugby season started in a sanctuary basement. 29 guys—some burly, some gawky, all dressed in rugby gear—stood in the basement of Colgate University’s chapel in Hamilton, New York.

The chapel stands at the top of one of the campus’ many rolling hills, a pristine white marble building at the heart of the small upstate town. At the bottom of the hill sits the rugby pitch.

The Still Reds had been scheduled to start practice that day, but coach Tim Burdick had no idea how many players were going to show up. Their friend and teammate, Victor Krivitski—Vic—had, one day earlier, died from cancer at his home in Cape May County, New Jersey, eight months after he was diagnosed. In the words of his father, Victor Michael Krivitski, Vic had “literally died in his mother’s arms.” He was 21 years old.

Yet on the evening of August 23, 29 young men showed up at the chapel with their practice gear on. Each player lit a candle. Then, candles in hand, the team strode out into the summer night.

Coach Burdick stayed behind a moment to talk to the chaplains and the rabbi who had just told the students that “there is no right way to grieve and there is no wrong way to grieve.” And as Burdick stepped out of the chapel, over the hill’s peak, and looked down at his team gathered on the rugby pitch, he learned how his players were going to deal with the loss of their friend and teammate.

“Sure enough, they had all spelled out V-I-C with the candles,” Burdick said. “They were burning right there on the hillside.”

He sat his team down beside the burning candles, and they all shared their Vic stories—the bear hugs that lifted them as high as Vic’s 6-foot-4 frame would allow; the time Vic welcomed them onto the team when they were still shy freshmen; the way Vic preferred rappelling out of his fourth-floor dorm window and down the side of the building to taking the stairs.

Then hooker Andrew Schlenger—the “fat, jolly guy,” according to his coach—spoke up.

“Seems to me Vic has done his part,” Schlenger told his teammates. “He went and died. Now all we have to do is win every game.”

On Sunday, November 13, the Still Reds were one win away from a perfect 13-0 season. They had beaten archrival Cornell, 23-15, in their first game, to return the Claret Mug (awarded annually to the winner of the Colgate-Cornell match) to Colgate for the first time in eight years. They had broken the all-time club records for tries, points and margin of victory the next week, when they humiliated Siena College, 81-3, on Victor Krivitski Family Fun Day, a day dedicated to their departed teammate. And they had made the conference playoffs for the first time in five years.

“This is the best they have ever done because they all love Vic,” Vic’s father said.

“The whole memory of Victor has taken on a life of its own,” said Vic’s mother, Roxane.

They were both talking over the phone: him from their home in New Jersey, where Victor Sr. had just come off a shift at his small bike shop; her from the car, one hour into her six hour drive back home. She had just watched Colgate beat William Paterson University, 28-17, to advance to the semifinals of the

National Qualifying Tournament. The women's rugby team, Colgate's president and Colgate's dean of students were also in attendance—there to meet her, cheer on the team, and remember Vic.

“This year has all been for Vic,” he said.

Colgate students, faculty, and alumni all hold the number 13 in reverence. In 1817, the liberal arts college was founded by 13 men who, legend has it, only had “13 dollars, 13 prayers, and 13 articles” between them. The school's zip code is also 13346: the first 13 stands alone, and the 3, 4, and 6 add up to 13. On November 13, after having scored 13 tries in their victory over Siena College, Colgate had an opportunity to go 13-0.

If the Still Reds won their lucky 13th game, they would qualify for the National Championships. On a neutral ground in Poughkeepsie, New York, all that stood in their way was Fairfield University (7-2), who was still reeling from their semi-final come-from-behind upset of host Vassar College.

Donning warm-up shirts and wristbands that read ‘TRY 4 VIC’—a play on both Vic's number and the rugby equivalent of a football touchdown, the try—and VK on their shorts, the Still Reds assembled on the sideline before their championship game. Arms around each other, in a circle, they stood over a ring of jerseys carefully placed around one shirt in the middle: the jersey that bore the number four on its back, the one that Vic had worn.

There, one win away from a perfect season, they announced the starting line-up, and the players picked up and put on their jerseys as their names were called.

Then coach Burdick said: “Hug a teammate.”

The Still Reds hugged one another as if they had not seen each other in months. They gripped each other with the kind of intensity usually reserved for doting mothers, or separated lovers. Then each of the starting 22 wrapped black electrical tape around his left arm, close to his heart.

Finally, the team headed to the try zone that they would be defending in the first half. They brought an urn with them. And, with Roxane Krivitski's consent, the team buried some of Victor Krivitski's ashes in the try zone.

“He should have been on the field with us,” explained co-captain Marc Foto. So for their championship game, Foto said, he would be. “We were a man up.”

Once the game began, Colgate was quickly three points down. Fairfield had capitalized on the Still Reds' careless turnovers, nervous penalties and porous back line, and had swiftly moved the ball deep into Colgate's half. An easy penalty kick put the Red Ruggers up 3-0.

With only four minutes left in the first half, the scoreboard had not changed. Colgate was still sloppy, and Fairfield was uninspired.

Then Colgate's nerves disappeared. They took control. The backs ran hard into tackles, the forwards sealed rucks with zeal. And in those last four minutes, Colgate scored 12 points to take a 12-3 lead into halftime.

The second half was just as one-sided as the last four minutes of the first. Fairfield broke a few big runs for scores, but Colgate kept pounding. The Still Reds grew stronger as the game went on, and the Red Ruggers tired. When the final whistle blew, Colgate had won 45-20. They were going to Nationals, which begin April 28 at Dartmouth College.

Their bench poured out onto the field, and the hugging started anew. They threw their arms around one another, and formed a circle at center field.

“Three cheers for the Sir!” the team’s other co-captain, Jack Henley, shouted, to thank the referee.

“Hip hip hooray! Hip hip hooray! Hip hip hooray!” the team responded in unison.

“Three cheers for Fairfield!” Henley shouted a bit louder.

“Hip hip hooray! Hip hip hooray! Hip hip hooray!” the team shouted back.

Then Henley stepped into the center of the circle. And, almost possessed, he screamed:

“Three cheers for Vic!”

“HIP HIP HOORAY! HIP HIP HOORAY! HIP HIP HOORAY!” the team screamed back.

The sound gripped the open mountain air. Nothing else existed to these young men, or to those watching, outside of that moment. Vic was there, if only because everybody standing in maroon and white on that field, on a farm in Poughkeepsie, N.Y., was thinking about him. If only for that moment, he lived again.

“We all really rallied behind him,” Henley said later of Vic. “[Vic’s memory] was the rallying cry that echoed throughout the season.”

“We were supposed to win,” said Foto.

Coach Tim Burdick sat in a living room in Long Island, two weeks before the start of the rugby season. It was Burdick’s brother’s living room, where Vic and Roxane were crashing for the night. Vic had texted Burdick three days earlier to ask his coach if he “still had a couch he could crash on.”

Vic and his Mom were traveling to a nearby clinic to inquire about experimental treatments. Doctors at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York City had told Vic two months earlier that they could no longer cure him.

“That’s ridiculous,” Roxane remembers Vic saying when they heard the news. “I’m going to find a way to make this work. I’m going to find a way to be cured.”

“He never really gave up,” she said.

Burdick passed Vic a photo of the rugby team. Vic pointed to the photo. “He knew every name,” Burdick said. “There’s Alex, there’s Jack...”

The next day, Vic and Roxane learned that Vic was not healthy enough to handle the experimental treatment they had been seeking.

The day after that, at the Atlantic Regional Medical Center in Pomona, New Jersey, they learned that Vic's cancer had spread from his lungs, his brain, and his left chest—around his heart, where it had started—to his liver, his left kidney and his spleen.

“That was the day we knew, no more,” Roxane said.

“I don't know if he cried, but I did.”

They stopped searching for more treatments. They went home.

Vic got thinner and thinner.

For the next five days, Roxane watched her only child, she said, “waste away and die before my very eyes.” The prognosis had been given on a Wednesday. Vic died the following Monday.

“He was our magnum opus,” his father bleated out through tears, months later. “He did an awful lot of living in his 21 years.”

Vic was a starter on the rugby team, an avid outdoorsman, a loving friend, and a loyal son. And he was the inspiration for a perfect season, an improbable run by a rugby team that had never won more than four games in a row.

“[Vic] was ridiculously uplifting, impossibly optimistic,” said co-captain Henley.

“His whole purpose in life was to make you smile, to make you happy,” his father agreed.

Burdick took the photo back, and asked Vic one last question: “Is there anything you want me to pass on to the boys?”

Vic's eyes got really wide.

“Just love ‘em,” Vic said.